How Vulnerable Are You?
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Acts 4:1-22
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Elsa is O.K. and that is good news indeed for a lot of concerned people. Elsa, you will recall, is the heroine of Born Free - an excellent motion picture about a lion, raised in captivity as a house pet and companion. Elsa responded eagerly to gentleness and affection and care. Her natural instincts for foraging, stalking and hunting were smothered by the careful provision of food and attention by her captors. And when the decision was made to return her birth-right; to release her to the freedom of the jungle, she had to be taught. She had to be trained to be free: uneducated in the ways of security and saftey. Well, Elsa made it. Not long ago her captor identified her in her natural habitat, doing what free lions were born to do.

There is a life parable in the story of Elsa who was born to be free, who became a captive of security and comfort, who was very vulnerable when she reclaimed her lost freedom.

We believe that God has created us to be free. By this we do not at all mean life without restraints, moral anarchy - (if it feels good, do it). Freedom, in a Christian context, means life encumbered by nothing that might restrict our ability to realize our potential. Christian freedom means the liberty to become everything we can - to grow to the fullest extent of our manhood - to exploit and use every ability, every gift, every latent possibility God has given us. It is the freedom to become what God created us to be.

Christian freedom is the ability to live for others: the liberty to rise above self-concern and give one's life away for that which is ultimately good and important and worthy. For the Christian, this is what life is all about - "Becoming all that we are able to become - and living for others." This is what we believe God had in mind when he created us in his image, and breathed the breath of life into us.

But God, in his infinite wisdom, has also built into us a very strong drive for saftey and a sensitivity for security. We come by it naturally: we have it

in common with all the lower animals. We are programmed, by the wisdom of providence, to avoid danger, to retreat from anything that threatens and to seek the situation that is secure. It's a good thing too, for it is hard to imagine any kind of sustained human existence if all of us lived "devil may care".

God made us this way and it's a very good way to be except for the fact that there is a conflict between seeking security and exercising freedom. If our ultimate concern is to be safe, to be totally secure, we aren't likely to go too far in realizing our potential as human beings. And it almost goes without saying that we will not be too terribly concerned about living for others.

For the fact of the matter is that when we expand our horizons, when we stretch our intellectual and emotional and physical capacities we have to sacrifice a little security. Anyone who has ever made the decision to go back to college knows the truth of that. It's always easier not to: it's safer not to risk the financial loss. We are vulnerable when we try to become more than what we are. We become critically vulnerable whenever we even attempt to live for others. To give - to extend ones' life into the life of another - to fight for what is right and good - to stand for convictions is always to be vulnerable. It is always to open oneself to hurt - the hurt of rejection, the hurt of failure. It is always too vulnerable to insult and loss of esteem. It is, of course, to be open to loss of time and ability and money.

And so many - perhaps a majority of us - simply don't try. Many simply opt for life in a shell - in the safe cocoon of non involvement and security. Many of us would just rather not be that vulnerable.

Our New Testament lesson this morning, taken from the 4th chapter of the Acts of the Apostles, is a good example of how Christian Faith, when it is lived, becomes synonymous with vulnerability. Peter and John had been involved in healing a lame man outside the gate of the Temple in Jerusalem. The man was jumping; shouting and generally making quite a commotion. A crowd gathered, and Peter used the occasion to deliver a strong testimony to his Lord Jesus Christ. The 4th chapter of Acts tells us that the number of people involved was quite large - that the incident

generated a lot of popular support for the Christian movement. The authorities, however, took a rather dim view of what was transpiring. Peter and John were arrested on the instigation of the Priests and Sadducees, ostensibly for preaching about the resurrection. There is a problem here for the interpreter in that the Sadducees were ordinarily tolerant to a fault of all views. They did not believe in a resurrection, but there is no other indication that arrests were made for differing from their particular theology.

The fact is that they - the Sadducees, along with the chief Priests were the real political power in Judea; that their political clout existed only at the whim of the Roman government; and that it was predicated upon their ability to keep the peace. A popular uprising, a mass movement of any kind, would more than likely result in Rome withdrawing the political power they had, and establishing, in its stead, a tight police state.

And so their concern was not so much theological as it was political and personal. When Peter and John had a hearing in the morning there was a lot of talk about how this healing miracle took place, and the consensus of those gathered to sit in judgement was that while nothing could be done about that, Peter and John should be enjoined never to do anything conspicuously in the name of Jesus Christ again.

Peter's response was classic: "You yourselves judge whether we should obey you or God. For we cannot stop speaking of what we have seen and heard." They were given another warning, in stronger terms, and then set free, - but now very vulnerable men. In a sense the outcome of their lives was determined at that moment when they chose to decline safety and to proceed doing what they knew themselves called to do.

Simon Peter had come a long way to this point. From rough fisherman to follower of Jesus: from the one who always spoke first and showed his ignorance to the one so full of anger and loyalty that he physically attacked a guard who was arresting Jesus: from the one who, alone, followed Jesus through the night of questioning and trial - to the one who denied him. And now - rough fisherman, standing in the

midst of the most learned and powerful men in his nation, speaking eloquently and strongly in a manner that impressed even them. Peter had come a very long way from the fish nets on the shores of Galilea, and it is interesting that Peter's growth as a man accompanied his deepening commitment to Jesus Christ. He came alive, grew, found himself on the cutting edge of life and literally in its seat of power when he gave his life to something other than self, saftey and security. He grew into his freedom - and simultaneously - his terrible vulnerability.

I think the Church of Jesus Christ is called to be what Peter was. I think the Church is called to confront the powers that be in the name of Jesus Christ, and there to speak a word about sick men and oppressed men and poor men. The catch phrase for several years has been "the Church must be relevant", and we are told that people are leaving our ranks because of rampant irrelevancy, and that the public generally views the Church as a not very important or influential participant in society.

In a sense, I agree. Much of what happens in the churches - much of what masquarades as Christianity is totally irrelevant: irrelevant to the realities of life in 1970, irrelevant to the personal needs of men and women who live in 1970. Much of it is irrelevant because to be relevant is to be, first of all free - free of all restraints that restrict our doing what we know God would have us do; free to live for others - and that means vulnerability. Peter discovered that. So long as the Apostles stayed in a little room talking about Jesus they were safe. That is, irrelevance may not be exciting, but it's secure. When they took to the streets, however; when they healed sick people and talked to thousands of people they became extremely vulnerable.

Presbyterians fancy their church in terms of venerability. The Presbyterian Church, the Presbyterian tradition is venerable, and we like it that way. But I have the nagging suspicion that God is far more interested in vulnerability than venerability.

I thank God for Presbyterian leadership that has made us vulnerable in recent years. We may make mistakes, we may err in judgement, we may rush in where the

proverbial angels fear to tread - but that's the risk of being vulnerable. And if we take this New Testament at all seriously it is a risk eminently worth the taking.

So far you and I are still secure. It's one thing for the Eastern Liberals in New York to pontificate about race and poverty and war. It's another thing entirely in Central Indiana. And yet at the bottom of it all these is a very personal decision to be made by every individual who wishes to call himself a Christian. We are called, as individuals, to be free and to be vulnerable.

Charles Lamb tells the story of an individual who was born a man and died a bookkeeper. "Besides my daylight servitude, I served over again all night in my sleep, and would awake with terrors of imaginary false entries, errors in my accounts, and the like. I was fifty years of age, and no prospect of emancipation presented itself. I had grown to my desk, as it were; and the wood had entered into my soul." ["The Superannuated Man": ;see Plain Words for Troubled Times: The Protestant Hour, E. Campbell]

I think we know a little bit about that. I think everyone of us has experienced the very real pressures which security creates. We know the enslavement to the symbols of success and the good life ala 1970. We know what it means not to be free, to succumb to life of self-centeredness because its safe. And we know the bad taste in our mouths when integrity forces us to look at what we are doing with the life God has given us.

How many times have we run for cover rather than doing or saying the right and honest thing? How many times have we backed away from conflict or shied away from involvement with others and then justified it as prudence? I have - many times - and you have too.

In order to love another person, you must be free. You must be willing to be vulnerable. To be a Christian means to love others - to place their well being and welfare at least on an equal level with your own. It means to stand with them and for them, and many times it means standing all alone. To be a faithful disciple of Jesus Christ is to be extremely vulnerable.

The world needs that today. Our community needs individuals who do more than talk: individuals who are willing to be vulnerable for the sake of their faith - and yet we - you and I - need it most of all. We need to taste the heady wine of freedom: of life for others: of life as God created it to be in all its beauty and love.

Theodore Roosevelt said it well, and I conclude with his words:

"Far better it is to dare mighty things, to win glorious triumph, even though checkered by failure, than to take rank with those poor spirits who neither enjoy much nor suffer much, because they live in the great twilight that knows not victory nor defeat."

Are you willing? Are you willing to be vulnerable?

Amen

Our father, forgive us for building our own prisons of saftey and security. Gird us with courage that we may be free. Sustain us in all things, that our lives may worthily reflect your love; Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen